

BIOGRAPHICAL

Guru Nanak, The Founder of a World Religion

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1. Introductory

There is an apocryphal *hadith*, a saying of Prophet Mohammad, that five kinds of men go to hell without being asked any previous reckoning: the rulers, because of their injustices; the Arabs because of their racial fanaticism; the peasants because of their stupid arrogance; the merchants because of their lies; and the scholars because of their mental confusion and envy. It is, therefore, prudent to define one's terms before attempting to say something on them.

Herein, what follows, the term "founder" means, not a follower, exegesist, syncretist, a metaphysician or a philosopher, but one who, while in direct contact with what Otto Rudolph in his: *Idea of the Holy* calls "Numenon", and compulsively impelled by it, proclaims, formulates and preaches a way to such a contact by others. A "religion" is neither ethics nor metaphysics, neither mystical awareness nor magic, neither theism nor worship of a deity or even the Deity; it is that which moves man to the depth of his being and yet has not its origin in the depths of human soul but moves

it from outside. Just as the central concept in art is "beauty", in ethics, "goodness", so in religion it is "holiness", an intimate contact or union with which is felt as utterly necessary for complete satisfaction and wholeness of man. A "world religion" is that way of life on which all mankind may walk without the apartheid of race, colour, sex, caste, class, country and clan.

In this monograph it is intended to give, first, a briefest possible life sketch of the historical man, Nānak, who became Guru Nānak, Nānak, the World Teacher, a short account of the nature of his prophetic claim and a bare outline of his teachings and their relevance to the modern human situation.

2 Nanak—The Man

Nānak was born on the 15th April, 1469 A.D. (Gregorian Calendar) in the north-west of India, now called, Nanakārā Sāhib—the Holy Birthplace of Nanak—situated in Pakistan from where the Sikhs, his followers, were expelled, almost to a man, in A.D. 1947 when the outgoing Britishers divided India into two

separate countries by drawing a pencil line on the map of an indivisible India. As might be expected, Nanak, the son of a petty, high-caste revenue official, was, from the beginning, of an unworldly turn of mind and many attempts of his parents to engage him in some gainful occupation, each time, ended in disaster, till he was persuaded to accept the gainful and important post of the Chief Supplies' Master of a nearby Muslim principality. The turning point in his life came when he was twenty-seven years old. During these days, he would, while performing his duties, pass out into reveries, frequently becoming trances. On one such occasion, while supervising weighing of grain stores, he stopped dead at the count of measure 13, which in Punjabi language is the word *terā*, also meaning *I am thine*, and he went on counting the refrain, *terā, terā*, while measure after measure of stores was being passed out. As was to be expected, the Government took a serious notice of it and an enquiry into his gross negligence was ordered against him. While the enquiry was still in progress, Nanak, as was his routine, went one early morning for his dip in the neighbouring stream and disappeared into the bed of the river for full three days; when a search for his body proved fruitless, he was presumed drowned. All these days, he had sat, what in ancient texts on *yoga* is called *jalastambhasamādhi*, 'trance-in-water', a skill acquirable through prescribed techniques and practices and also available to gifted individuals from birth. There are many who possess this skill in India even today. On the fourth day he emerged from the depths of

the waters and uttered the following words: "There is no Hindu, no *mussalmān*." Whether he meant that deep down in the substratum of Aryan and Semitic religions there is an identity of base or whether he intended to convey that the truth of both had been obscured and lost to their practitioners on account of verbal formulae and empty rituals, it was a fit formula for the commencement of his divine mission that demands acceptance of genuine dialogue rather than formal conversion as the goal of transcending particularisms of contending cultures and feuding religions, with a view to discover a universal concept, not synthesis or syncretic amalgam, but deeper penetration of one's own religion in thought, devotion and action, and thus to arrive at the realisation that in every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its particular importance, for, that to which it points, breaks through its particularity elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meanings of human existence. This is not the doctrine of the so-called 'fundamental unity of all religions', for such a claim has its limitations. Given fundamental differences in conceptions of reality and attitudes towards the world, no real synthesis can be expected, there being incompatible elements in the cores of various religions. None of these religions can draw closer to the others, for each must claim itself to be the way and the truth for its own believers, even if not for all men. No world-religion can seriously consider abandoning its own absolutistic claim, for if it did, it would scarcely have the right to call

itself a religion, much less a world-religion. But a sort of reconciliation, mutual understanding and respect is possible, generating civilised tolerance and growing co-operation. It seems more likely that this is the true intent and meaning of what Nanak uttered on this occasion.

The *genre* of pious Sikh literature, called *Janam Sākhī*, 'The Testaments of the Life of Nanak', almost unanimously describe the experience of Nanak during his 'trance-in-water':

"As God willed, Nanak, His devotee, was escorted to His Presence. Then a cup filled with Liquid of Immortality was given him, accompanied by the command: 'Nanak, pay attention. This is the cup of Holy Adoration of my Name. Drink it... I am with thee and thee do I bless and exalt. Go, rejoice in My Name and preach it to others... Let this be thy calling'."¹

Nanak himself refers to this assignment with deep gratitude:

"I, a jobless minstrel, was assigned a rewarding task."²

Nanak now had been exalted as the *Guru* Nanak, Nanak the World Teacher, and after resigning his government post he set out upon four long and arduous missionary journeys on foot into the four corners of the then accessible parts of the world to him, India, Inner Himalayas, Ceylon, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Middle East, Eastern Turkey and Arabia, which lasted from the year 1476 to the year 1521 when he permanently returned to India to found a religious commune-town, Kartarpur, where he passed away on September 22, 1539. These journeys have been held and described in Sikh pious literature as having been undertaken:

"to purify and divinise the entire mankind on all parts of the globe."³

3. Nanak's Ten Manifestations

Guru Nanak had nine successor World Teachers, who through precept and practice, fulfilled and applied the teachings of Nanak, the First, to the changing and growing politico-social situations of the day, and in their own independent revelations and testaments explained and exegetised the contents and implications of Guru Nanak's revelations now recorded in the Sikh scripture, *Gurū Granth*. The Tenth Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh (1665-

1 "āgyā Parmesar kī hoī, jo Nānaku bhagatu hājaru hoā, tān amrit dā katorā bhari kari āgyā nālī miliā. hukamu hoā: 'Nānak! ehu amrit mere nām kā piālā hai, tū pio...Nānaku main tere nālī hān. main tere tāin nihālu kīā hai, aru jo merā nāo levegā so sabh mai nihālu kīte haini. tū jāi kari merā nāmu japī, aru lokān thīn bhī japāi. ...tū ihā kirati kari"

—*Purātan Janam Sākhī* (Ed. Bhai Vir Singh) 1967. P. 40.

2 hao dhādhī vekāru kārāi lāiā. —*Mājh 1 (Vār 27) Gurū Granth*, P. 150.

3 chadiā sodhani dhartī lohāi. —*Vārān Bhai Gurdas* (1/24).

1707) was the last manifestation of Nanak who passed on the preaching and practice of Sikhism as the World religion to the Collective Corpus of all the believers inspired and guided by the Word, as revealed and recorded in the Sikh scripture. Ever since, the Sikh scripture occupies the central focus of all Sikh congregations and the body of the non-institutional Sikh Church is comprised of the collectivity of all the believers in Sikhism, and is called *the Panth*, 'the Way of Life'. Nanak the Tenth further ordained (1692) the *Order of the Khalsa*, to establish, to perpetuate and to legitimatise the social pattern amongst governments, societies and states of the world, wherein the Sikh values of life, truthfulness, honesty, mutual trust and loyalty, productive labour and communal sharing, gratitude and integrity of conduct, authentic living and above all spiritual transformation that raises man to what St. Teresa of Avila, the Christian mystic, refers to as "spiritual marriage", wherein a God-filled man returns to Society for its service and edification. These are the Sikhs whom one might meet in all parts of the world, bearded, unshorn and turbaned, symbolising natural, spontaneous, unmanufactured or fashioned, pristine integrity of man. It is to this *Order of the Khalsa* that Arnold Toynbee, in his *History*, points as the true prototype of the *elan* of the Communist Party of Lenin, while rejecting the latter's claim that his Communist Party was a unique phenomenon in the history of the societies of mankind.

4. Nature of the Revelations of Nanak

Nanak is the first born in India who claims that the religion he preaches is a revealed religion. "I am completely dumb as I am and I speak as I am made to, by God." "I utter and preach the word just as it comes to me"⁴ Our knowledge of the psychological character of the religious experience and its matrix is so minimal that it is not possible for us to make positive statements about divine revelation. Koranic revelation is not a living experience between God and man, a happening into which God Himself enters, but it is a book. The first word of Mohammad's revelation is, "read", and the gilded page of a book is shown to him, the book that the angel has brought down from heaven. Islam was a book-religion from the first moment on. Jesus left no written word to his followers and is merely reported as having claimed full authority of and identity with his Father, the God, for what he was preaching. Moses, like a much earlier Babylonian king, Hammurabi (22nd Century B.C.) received a material, inscribed tablet of laws, through agency of a burning bush, and from the sun-god on high, *Sammās*, respectively. The seers, *rishis*, of *Vedās*, grasped, without necessarily comprehending, eternal sounds, *sruti*, and then passed them on to future generations in mnemonic formulate and therefore, the texts of *Vedās* are claimed as un-man-made, *apauruseya*, and eternal, co-existent with the beginning of Existence, *anādī*. The "voices" heard by extraordinary men,

4. *tā mai kahiā kahanu jā tujhai kahāiā*. — *Vadl ansu* 1 (1), *Guru Granth*, P. 566.

throughout the ages, such as Socrates and Joan of Arc in the West have been known to be of obscure origin, proven unreliability and dubious authenticity. Mysticism is a variety of human experience that might be interpreted but in itself is non-sensory, non-intellectual and altogether non-verbal and ineffable. Guru Nanak claims direct contact with suprasensuous Truth and the Divine Person the 'speech' of whom is sensory, intellectual and verbal, experienced with an immediacy and simultaneity that carries with it its own authenticity and which is, *sui generis*, fashioned into a mould of poetry and song. Bergson has well pointed out that "before intellection, properly so-called, there is the perception of structure and rhythm". The nature of Guru Nanak's revelations is, thus, shown as unique and mysterious in character and origin:

5. Teachings of Nanak

Prophets of religion, like other men, are also rooted in time and place. The teachings of a prophet may amount to unique contributions of enduring value to the thought of his age and he may say that which is a class by itself, without a precursor, without a successor, logically untraceable to antecedents, but thereby a prophet does not cease to belong to his age; just as he is rising most above it, he is truly rooted in it. This is true of Guru Nanak also.

The central teachings of Guru Nanak may

be briefly summed up as follows :

1. He teaches that it is not the intellectual formula or verbal assent to it that liberates man, but the deed and his quality of living. "Truth is higher than everything but higher still is true living."⁵ "The way to heaven is not through talk but is by truthful, authentic living."⁶

2. Self-alienation is the most profound affliction, not only of the modern man but it has been so ever since the man began to look within. In the most ancient recorded thought of man—the *Veda*—this self-alienation, *kilvisa*, the primal fission when the One became Many, is pinpointed as the basic problem of the human psyche and the ritual technique of *yajña* is recommended for regaining this lost unity, and this is the beginning of the prestigious Hindu contribution of the techniques and systems of Yoga to the insights into the psychologies and religious practices of mankind. Religion always proceeds from an existential dichotomy between the man and the world, between man and God, and man longs to overcome this dichotomy to achieve a wholeness which appears to him as necessary for a satisfying and authentic living. Pascal describes the point well by observing that "all man's troubles stem from the fact that he cannot bear to stay in a room alone with himself." Each one of us more or less—encounters a sense of despair when he is forced to compromise his inner vision with the realities of

5. *sachahu orai sabhu ko upari sachu āchāru*. —Siri 1 (ast. 14), *Guru Granth*, P. 62.

6. *galī bhisati na jāīai chhutai sachu kamāī*—Majh 1 (Var 7) *Guru Granth* P. 141

a world he must share with others. It is one of the terms of a social being as it is the predicament of a lonely person, and, therefore, part of adult life, particularly of the intellectual whom Albert Camus describes as "someone whose mind watches itself", and in whom this disease of self-alienation is apt to run rampant. In the whole of the Sikh scripture, as in the revelations of Guru Nanak himself, there are repeated references to this great wrench in human psyche and the cure is declared as a spiritual system and discipline based on the fundamental psychological insights of the Yoga and its adaptation to a secular social life, thus discarding the necessity of turning one's back on the world and full social participation in it in search for annulment of man's self-alienation. This system and way of life is the *Nām-Yoga* of Sikhism that constitutes the greatest contribution of Guru Nanak to the Religion wherein the secular and the spiritual are indissolubly married. This 'Yoga of the Name' is the core of the 'Religion of the Name' which Sikhism is and which God commanded Guru Nanak to practise and preach to the world.

3. The third central teaching of Guru Nanak is that the fully integrated person, the liberated individual, the deified man must revert to the world and society to participate in its activities, to guide and assist it in striving for

achieving a situation in which human mind is free, human psyche is made whole, authentic living is facilitated and individuals may evolve into "deified men". When Guru Nanak travelled deep into the Inner Himalayas crossing Nepal and some portions of Western Tibet, reaching the legendary Kailas Mountain and the celestial Mansrover lake, the snowy and inaccessible abode of the perfected yogins who were amazed to see a mere mortal reach there, enquired, "How does the news go with the world of the mortals?"⁷ they asked Guru Nanak. "The Society is rotten to its core", replied Guru Nanak, and then raised an accusing finger at these yogins, adding, "And sires, you are the guilty ones, for, it is men of high culture and sensitivity who alone can guide and sustain Society, but you have chosen to be self-indulgent escapees."⁸

4. When asked as to what power and competence there was for lifting Society out of its incurable morass, Guru Nanak has gone on record as saying: "The two levers, that of organised confrontation with and opposition to evil and the right idea that must inspire it."

Thus, this fourth teaching of Guru Nanak furnishes the Sikh reply to the questions: Must the carriers of grace rise like lions or die like lambs? What is the relation of exemplary

7. 'māt lok vichī kiā vartārā?'—*Vārān Bhai Gurdas* (1/29).

8. *Bābe ākhiā : Nāth jī*.....

pāp girāsī pīrthamī dhāulū khadā dhārī heth pukāra.
sidh chhapi baithe parbatī kaunu jagatī kau pāri utārā.

—*Vārān Bhai Gurdas* (1/29).

violence to exemplary martyrdom? Whether one person stands for all or all for one or a small pioneering elite act as stand-ins for the rest? Whether the elite withdraw into an enclave or into a wilderness to bear witness or act as leaven to the lump? How is a balance to be struck between 'being' and 'doing', wisdom and inner certitude?

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